R E P O R T R E S U M E S

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CREATIVE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCES IN THE HIGH SCHOOL.

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THE ENGLISH TEACHER CAN ROUSE STUDENTS OUT OF UNTHINKING ACCEPTANCE AND PASSIVITY BY PROVIDING THEM WITH CREATIVE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCES DESIGNED TO SHAPE THEM INTO CURIOUS AND RESPONSIVE INDIVIDUALS. TO FIND A PERSPECTIVE ON TEACHING CREATIVELY THE MANY FACETS OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND COMPOSITION, TEACHERS SHOULD LOOK TO STATEMENTS MADE BY SUCCESSFUL WRITERS WHO, THROUGH THE CREATIVE USE OF LANGUAGE, HAVE CONTRIBUTED SUBSTANTIALLY TO OUR CULTURE. A CREATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING SHOULD HELP STUDENTS TO (1) EXPAND THEIR PERCEPTIVENESS BY CHALLENGING THEM TO MAKE FULL USE OF THEIR MINDS, EMOTIONS, AND SENSES, (2) EDUCATE THEIR EARS SO THAT THEY CAN RESPOND TO, INTERPRET, AND USE THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE EXPERTLY, (3) BROADEN THE SCOPE OF WHAT THEY HAVE TO WRITE ABOUT, (4) PLAN, DELIBERATE, WRITE, AND RE-WRITE UNTIL THEY CAN HANDLE WORDS AND THEIR COMBINATIONS EASILY AND PRECISELY, (5) TRANSLATE OVERTONES IN THEIR READING, (6) CREATE TOGETHER IN RELATED EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES, AND (7) GAIN CONFIDENCE IN THEMSELVES THROUGH THE WORK INVOLVED IN MASTERING THE SKILLS OF READING, WRITING, SPEAKING, AND LISTENING. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE ENGLISH JOURNAL," VOL. 49 (NOVEMBER 1960), 563-569.) (JB)

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FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

Creative Language Experiences in the High School

Marion C. Sheridan

What is creativity and how can it be promoted? The author answers this question by defining a challenging approach to creativity in the study of English. Dr. Sheridan, a past president of the NCTE, is chairman of the English Department in the Hillhouse High School, New Haven, Connecticut.

WALKING down Madison Avenue in New York, my companion called my attention to an enormous modern building under construction for the Union Carbide Company. We crossed the street. He had me stop to look back at this structure which was to occupy a large city block. The building expressed solidity and importance. It stretched high enough to suggest aspiration. My companion asked me to reflect on what man could do. In his lifetime there had been almost an infinitesimal activity in the production of acetylene lights. That activity had expanded into what the new building represented; it showed what men could do if they would. Developments from acetylene lights are but one instance of many, if we but look, listen, and reflect.

I am a believer in coincidence. My companion had no knowledge of the fact that I was pondering "Creative Language Experiences in the High School." His approach was a reflective one, with thought of the creative in many fields, including the stock market. But it seemed to me to be almost a symbol of what teachers work for in the field of language achievements.

We shall not directly motivate the building of incredible structures for the earth or the air, but we have the privilege of working with those who will have a part, proud or modest, in the achievements of the coming years.

We cannot think of what our world calls for without realizing that today it is most important to stimulate the creative. That has not always been the aim of education. In some civilizations, as in the Chinese education of the past, the aim was to memorize, to follow the past, to insure conformity. In contrast, in all aspects of education today, there is an urgent need for the creative. In pleading for the creative, I am well aware that people have been classified at least tentatively as creative, less creative, and non-creative. I have hope that there can be some shifts in these classifications if individuals have an opportunity to be exposed and subjected to creative forces.

When I make this statement I am well aware of some human needs. I believe firmly in the importance of

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disciplining in the sense of strengthening and perfecting. Stress on such discipline, inherent in the need for quality in education, gives a new and high place to the creative. So does automation. When routine and mechanical operations can increasingly be performed by machines, what is left for man but the creative? There may be degrees, but I am optimistic enough to believe in what can be achieved through a creative approach, an approach directed constantly towards the opening of interests and possibilities.

In our field these possibilities are to be realized through language experiences which offer a wide field for the creative. The best way to insure creative language experiences seems to be through a creative approach. Students are to be motivated to the maximum use of their minds in thinking, their emotions in feeling, their senses in responding in more ways than one—seeing what is before them and in type; hearing, smelling, touching, tasting, whether in actual experience or through the symbols of type and other mass media of communication.

Applying the word "creative" to an *approach* to the many facets of language is a broader approach than the most common one. Often "creative" in language experiences has been restricted to what has been called "creative writing." When the word "creative" was beginning to come into use in connection with writing, keen-minded and respected teachers of English were eloquent in criticizing colleagues who attempted to preempt Divine powers. Now that the initial shock of the word "creative" in connection with writing has passed, the term "creative writing" has become sufficiently shopworn to fail to excite any overtones of Biblical creation. The term has ceased to be particularly emotive. If a better term could be found, it would be used. Meanwhile the term "creative writing" goes on its way.

Often it has had an unpleasant connotation, though some of the courses may have been excellent. Creative writing has been associated with empty, airy, flowery, illogical, formless, undisciplined writing. Sometimes it has been synonymous with run-on sentences, sentence fragments, and ejaculations. It has been thought of as the special province of starry-eyed students who know how to languish and to compose purple passages. For those students creative writing was supposed to be natural. Though a dichotomy is to be avoided, in a dichotomy, creative writing has been opposed to closely reasoned, logical expository writing, which is presently prized as a test of writing power.

Such power has been of importance in preparation for college. To disregard what is prized in college preparation is becoming increasingly difficult in all parts of the country. All secondary schools have a serious obligation to discover able students, to motivate them for college, and to see that neither economic nor any other obstacles prevent their gaining wide educational opportunities. Goals are being raised.

Recently Dr. Frank H. Bowles, president of the College Entrance Examination Board, was quoted as saying, "The academic program in our high schools is becoming dominant.

. . . I feel quite safe in prophesying that within five years virtually every four-year college in the country will be requiring a program of entrance examinations." He continued, "Over the next quarter century the average requirements for admission to American colleges will rise by the equivalent of one full academic year, or, in other words, colleges will, a generation hence, hold as their requirements for admission the requirements that now apply to admission to the sophomore year of college. This can be done," he said, "without lengthening the secondary school course, and I am reasonably certain that it will be done."[1]

Such a prophecy makes a positive demand of teaching. Student competition is to be keen. Standards are to be higher. The program must be realistic, one for robust, clear-eyed students. The emphasis will be on quality. In public secondary schools there will continue to be a wide range of students, even if that range may be narrowed. For all students, however, the creative approach seems to be a wise one, discovering all that is potential in young people of varied backgrounds. The approach is appropriate for those who know they are going to college, who hope they are going, who may never go, and the increasing group of those who may go, not immediately after secondary school but at some later date.

Creativity and Individuals

The creative approach recognizes degrees of ability and differences in individuals. It regards no one as hopeless. It is concerned with the practical, the concrete, the imaginative, the logical, and the abstract. The creative approach should jog students out of passivity, out of mechanical ruts, out of unthinking acceptance of what is. It should make familiar things strange and worthy of note, give new instruments for thought, and encourage daring for combinations of the old. It is directed towards making s t u d e n t s alert, curious, responsive, independent, original, and pioneering individuals.

To say which of the four aspects of language experiences—reading, writing, listening, or speaking—is the most important is difficult. At times one phase may require concentration and a degree of isolation, but complete separation should be rare. Each phase contributes definitely to the other phases. At present there are few if any statistics about the contributions of one to another, but there are surmises. There has been some research. Future studies may turn surmises into statistics.

As we know, students may listen and learn; they may even count on succeeding by the kind of listening given a most unpleasant name, brain picking. Often after they talk over a subject, they write better; they may read better. Reading may be for enjoyment, escape, exploration; for information and ideas; and for penetration into the way effects are achieved. After they read, they may write better.

A publication of the Wellesley, Massachusetts, school system placed emphasis on the importance of reading.[2] Edwin H. Sauer of the Graduate School of Education, Harvard Uni-

[1] Terry Ferrer, "Colleges Put Screws on High Schools," New York *Herald Tribune*, Sunday, November 1, 1959. Section 2, pages 1 and 3.

[2] *Reading—Key to Learning*, Report of the Wellesley Public Schools, 1955. 42 pages. p. 6.

versity, placed composition as the basis of the course of study. He wrote: "The composition as the basis of the English course of study is not an easy arrangement, for, perhaps more than any other system, it makes knowledge of the child the major obligation."[3]

To get perspective on the creative it is helpful to consider and reflect upon statements by those who have made creative contributions through their use of language, since it is language with which we are largely concerned. These conclusions will prevent undue idealism. They will give a basis for a realistic approach. These successful writers force a realistic approach.

Archibald MacLeish in "On the Teaching of Writing," in *Harper's* for October 1959, wrote, "Everybody knows that 'creative writing'—which means the use of words as material of art—can't be taught. Nevertheless hundreds of professors in hundreds of colleges go on teaching it. Which is absurd but not as absurd as it sounds."

He also wrote, "Exposition has rules and can be taught, as generations of British state papers demonstrate. The 'art of writing' has graces and can be taught as armies of belletrists prove. But writing *as* an art cannot be taught because writing as an art is the unique achievement of *an* artist, which is to say, of one unique and different man solving his unique and different problems for himself."

He emphasizes the relationship of reading and writing. A young writer "should quite literally, read his head off." But the reading should follow the young writer's own leads.[4]

[3]"The English Course of Study: A Definition," *The English Leaflet* (November 1958), p. 10.

[4]October 1959. p. 158.

Creativity in Writing

In his recent book on the life and times of Stephen Vincent Benét, Charles Fenton quoted Mr. Benét as saying in response to a question about the value of undergraduate writing courses, "You cannot force writers like early peas, and then—writing is about life. And all life can't be in a college. . . .

"The whole thing is in the man. You cannot devise any course to teach people to write. If you have the right sort of man, however, he can teach something about writing to most people. Even he, in my mind, cannot teach an original creator of the first or second rank although he might help him to avoid certain mistakes."[5]

These quotations place definite limitations on what can be done in certain aspects of the creative in relation to writing. What then can be done with a creative approach?

We can help students to write what they will have to write. We can broaden the scope of what they will have to write about and wish to write about; we can give them an idea of how to do it. Students may write of what is on the streets, on the country roads, in books, at lectures, over the radio, in conversation. What Elizabeth Bowen has described as a writer's task would often be a useful aim in speaking or writing: "to whittle down his meaning to the exactest and finest possible point. What, of course, is fatal is when he does not know what he does mean; he has no point to sharpen."[6]

[5]Yale University Press, 1958. 436 pages. pp. 46-7.

[6]"Notes on Writing a Novel," *Orion II*, 1945, in *Collected Impressions* (London: Longmans Green and Company, 1950), p. 263.

From whittling down meaning there should grow a respect for words. Words must be defined. They must be followed to see that they are not unintentionally protean. The approach is creative when it forces the writer to see words, to make old words into new words. Into an understanding of words heard, read, should come sensitivity and responsiveness to words—factual words for their denotation, words for their emotive power and their connotation.

Words and sentences have concerned those who use and reflect upon language. Robert Frost's sentences were said to be as he described Emerson's: "sentences that may look tiresomelessly alike, short and with short words, yet turn out as calling for all sorts of ways of being said aloud or in the mind's ear. . . . Writing is unlaboring to the extent that it is dramatic."[7]

Students may also come to understand that there may be words which should not be clear immediately. C. E. Montague recognized that fact. So did Robert Frost in connection with interpreting one of Emerson's poems: "I don't like obscurity and obfuscation, but I do like dark sayings I must leave the clearing of to time. And I don't want to be robbed of the pleasure of fathoming depths for myself."[8]

Whether the meaning should be gained immediately or left for clearing up requires perceptiveness and discrimination and the use of all the senses. The tone should be recognized whether, for example, in reading Shaw or in sensing the irony of an excerpt from the recent film of *The Devil's Disciple*.

The creative approach should give a kind of humility. Pasternak suggested this when he wrote: "I had the adolescent, the nihilist conceit of the half-taught which despises whatever seems attainable, whatever can be 'earned' by effort. I looked down on industry as uncreative, taking it upon myself to lay down the law on matters of which I knew nothing. 'In real life,' I thought, 'everything must be miraculous and preordained; nothing must be planned, deliberate, willed.' "[9]

The creative approach should penetrate smugness, ignorance, the conceit of the half-taught. Instead of waiting for the miraculous, students should discover that it is well to plan, to deliberate, to will.

The creative approach should raise students as individuals above the mob, which may be as Tchekhov wrote: "The mob thinks it knows and understands everything; and the more stupid it is the wider it imagines its outlook to be."[10] The creative approach requires of individuals what the mob lacks: curiosity, reflection, thinking, conjuring up new combinations from the familiar.

There should be no objection to industry. It is not necessarily uncreative. Anthony Trollope wrote in his autobiography: "A small daily task, if it be really daily, will beat the labours of a spasmodic Hercules. It is the tortoise which always catches the hare. The hare has no chance. He loses more time in glorifying himself for a quick

[7] Adams, J. Donald. "Speaking of Books," *New York Times Book Review*, Nov. 1, 1959.
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] *An Essay in Autobiography* (London: Collins and Harvill Press, 1959), pp. 49-50.
[10] Allen, Walter. *Writers on Writing* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1959), p. 138.

spurt than suffices for the tortoise to make half his journey. . . ."[11] My idea of industry, however, for a creative approach is not unimaginative, monotonous drill.

The creative approach requires persistence as Wallace Stegner indicated in the November *Atlantic* in his words "To a Young Writer": "For one thing you never took to writing mean self-expression, which means self-indulgence. You understood from the beginning that writing is done with words and sentences, and you spent hundreds of hours educating your ear, writing and rewriting until you began to handle words in combination as naturally as one changes tones with the tongue and lips in whistling. . . . In acknowledging that the English language is a difficult instrument, and that a person who sets out to use it expertly has no alternative but to learn it, you did something else; you forced yourself away from that obsession with self that is the strength of a very few writers and the weakness of so many."

Creativity and Other Activities

The imagination enters into all phases of the creative language experiences. It does not prevent distinguishing between fact and opinion, nor does its use minimize facts when facts are called for. The imaginative may come in translating overtones. It may come in the teaching of literature in creating the atmosphere of places, a task more difficult than at first it appears. The setting of *Our Town* is not that of *Ethan Frome*, though the two are more closely related than either is to the setting of *Giants in the Earth*, to give obvious examples, which may still baffle those without imagination. Students do not have the feeling for places that members of NCTE have when they meet in Pittsburgh, Denver, Chicago, and Miami. Nor do they have penetration into the significance of the time of an event. It may be difficult for us to know of tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. It is no less difficult for students to realize aspects of today and of yesterday.

The creative approach is more or less accepted with extracurricular activities connected with language experiences. The creative point of view a teacher develops by working with students on papers, magazines, in book clubs, and in dramatics aids the teacher in a creative approach in the classroom. The creative approach recognizes the value of such activities.

The creative approach offers an answer to some of the questions asked in defining "The Basic Issues in the Teaching of English." Consider, for example, issues 10, 12, and 14. In part Basic Issue 10 asks:

> Should the basic program in English be modified for students who are primarily interested in science, technology, or related fields? . . . Should they undertake the regular basic programs as a liberal humanistic discipline or should they study material which is closer to their presumed interests? Should their assigned reading emphasize the prose of ideas and processes to the exclusion of belles lettres? Should they be trained to write functional, practical compositions and leave to others the freer and more imaginative kinds of writing? Has the profession any obligation to educate these increasingly important

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 227.

members of our younger generation in critical evaluation, aesthetic responsiveness, and imagination?

12. How should writing be taught? . . . Should students be taught to "express themselves" or to "communicate"? Should their writing assignments be related to their reading, to their direct experience, or to both? How can both imaginative and factual writing be given their just share of emphasis? Is learning to write primarily to think?

14. What is the relation between learning to write and the reading of imaginative literature? Conversely, how can a student ever acquire a sensitiveness to language without studying literary works which illustrate such sensitiveness?[12]

The creative approach offers the miracle of the promise of something new. Students, individuals, in terminal courses as well as those in courses leading to further study need the creative approach. Something wholesome, life-giving should happen as a result of day to day encouragement of curiosity or inquiry, illumination, imagination, and thinking. Students may then place value on flexibility and originality with power to organize and perhaps, more important, to reorganize.

The creative approach works from and toward responsiveness, with recognition of thought and emotion so fundamentally a part of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. These language experiences should make students into individuals for their teachers. More important even is the fact that these individuals may gain confidence in themselves not by concentration on self but by hard work resulting in an enlargement of outlook and an increase in perceptiveness.

In some fields there are tangible evidences of the creative in objects, in massive buildings, or in dividend checks. Through the creative approach in the use and interpretation of language, the intangible results should equal tangible results. We may at least dream that the intangible results will be of far greater importance in liberating the human spirit.

[12]Supplement to *The English Journal*, September 1959.

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